

Maggie's Verjuice Cookbook

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Extract

Introduction

I can't count the number of times I've been asked, 'Just what is this verjuice you seem to love so much?'

For those of you who have never heard of it, or have bought a bottle and found that it languished at the back of the cupboard for ages while you tried to find a use for it, I thought it might be helpful to give a simple explanation of what it is and how I think it can improve your cooking.

Verjuice, literally meaning 'green juice', is the juice of unripe grapes. In cooking terms, it's what's known as an acidulant, which gives a sour flavour (often referred to as sharpness or bite) to foods. Good food always has a pleasing balance of flavours on the palate and, whether we consciously think about it or not, an acidulant is necessary to give a 'brightness' to food. Indeed, without it, flavours can be flat.

Of all acidulants, verjuice is the most gentle. It truly lifts the flavour of food without dominating, and I know of no better way to enhance flavour, no better way to make food taste fresh and alive. That doesn't mean I ignore the more common acidulants – lemon juice, vinegar or wine – all of which I use in my cooking (and all of which can be used in place of verjuice, just in lesser amounts), but I prefer the gentleness of verjuice. It is also wine-friendly, which is good to keep in mind if matching wine to food is important to you.

Verjuice has a long history, having been used in cooking for centuries throughout Europe and the Middle East. In the Middle Ages it was made from sour fruits such as gooseberries, crabapples and plums, however the practice of using unripe grapes (either those picked early to thin out the crop, or those growing too high on the bunch to ripen enough for winemaking) is the one that has endured over time. In fact, in many wine-growing countries it is still a part of the peasant farming culture to make verjuice (known as verjus in France, agresto in Italy, agraz in Spain, hosrum in Lebanon and abghooreh in Iran). It's all about the principle of wasting nothing.

This philosophy is one that I share, and which would ultimately lead me to discover verjuice myself. My husband Colin and I became vigneron and game farmers in the Barossa Valley in 1973, and six years later we opened the

Farmshop, where we sold our produce (pheasant, quail, guinea fowl and grapes) prepared and cooked in different ways. Being completely untrained as a cook, I immersed myself in books on food from Mediterranean cultures. I was hungry for ideas, and reading about food was my education. First was Elizabeth David's *French Provincial Cooking*, followed by several works by female cooks from rural France who inspired me to become what I am today, a country cook who makes the most of the produce I have to hand. (Having been raised in Sydney, it's sometimes a surprise to me that I took to country living like a duck to water, and completely immersed myself in the rhythm of the seasons in this beautiful valley.) I positively devoured these books, and it was through them that I learnt about verjuice for the first time. They piqued my interest – just reading about verjuice I felt a sense of affinity with it, almost as if I could 'taste' it as I read. Given my preference for sour flavours, I just knew it was going to be something I would love.

Life is all about timing. In 1984, we couldn't sell our crop of rhine riesling grapes, so I convinced a great friend of mine, winemaker Peter Wall, to help me make verjuice. In a classic case of necessity being the mother of invention, we forged ahead, without a recipe, a method or even a benchmark to work towards. What a beginning it was! I was so proud of my flagons of verjuice that I sat them above the mantelpiece of the fire at the restaurant . . . and shouldn't have been surprised when they exploded!

In those early days I gave my verjuice to chefs I knew and admired, including Stephanie Alexander, Janni Kyritsis and Lew Kathreptis, and began to use it myself. From such humble beginnings, I never dreamt of the huge journey it would take me on. I'm told that I was the first in the world to make verjuice on a commercial scale. What delights me more is that it is now being produced commercially in many countries across the world – which, to me, legitimises it as a staple ingredient in the kitchen.

Much has changed since those early days. As well as the classic verjuice, we now produce a slightly sweeter version, the beautifully pink-hued Sangiovese verjuice, made from crushed red grapes. I find this is a perfect companion to desserts, though it works in savoury dishes too (and it's pretty special in a gin and tonic!). Interestingly, it's a little known fact that verjuice can be enjoyed as a drink; over the years, I've had many a refreshing glass of verjuice with ice and fresh mint to cool me down whilst toiling in a hot kitchen. I've even had cocktails made with verjuice named after me – great fun! While too sour for some people, funnily enough three of my five grandchildren – Ben, Rory and Zoe – absolutely love to drink verjuice. In fact, from when he could first talk, Ben has been asking for a glass of 'white' or 'pink' whenever he visits the Farmshop. My love of drinking verjuice led me to develop another drink based on the unfermented juice of grapes, Sparkling Ruby Cabernet. This is made from early harvest grapes, though it's not as sour as verjuice, but fruity and tart instead.

I hope that you can see from this collection of over 100 recipes that you can use verjuice in all your cooking – it's not just for salad dressings. Try it in everything from soups and braises, seafood dishes, pasta and grills to delicate desserts and hearty puds (I feel the list is endless . . .). Some of the recipes in this book use verjuice as a key flavour, whereas others use the lightest drizzle right at the end to lift the dish to another level.

One of the easiest, and I think best, ways to use verjuice is to add it to a pan of hot roasted vegetables towards the end of cooking, using a basic technique called deglazing. This transforms ordinary roasted veg into something really special, giving them a brightness of flavour and a syrupy sheen that is irresistible. Served on bruschetta (see recipe on page 28), these are a real hit at our daily cooking demonstrations at the Farmshop, where visitors can learn a few simple ways to cook with verjuice and taste the spoils. Even in the depths of winter, I'm always amazed at how people appear from nowhere, just around lunchtime, to take in the heady smells and sample some of our fare. I'm no longer surprised when they linger afterwards to ask questions of my team about verjuice, and I love being able to share my experience of this extraordinary ingredient with so many people.

I encourage you to try cooking with verjuice – it's such a simple way to add flavour to your food. Try it in one or two recipes to start with, and soon you might find yourself adding a splash here, and a splash there, to liven up all kinds of dishes. You might even, in the words of my fabulous recipe tester for this book, Fiona Hammond, find yourself becoming a verjuice junkie! I hope these recipes inspire you to find your own way to add a bit of magic to your cooking.

If you have a grapevine in your garden, you can even make your own verjuice. All you need to do is pick the grapes when they are just beginning to swell a little, but are still very tart. Crush them in a mouli or push them through a fine-meshed sieve, discarding the skins and seeds, and then pour the juice into ice-cube trays and freeze. When you need the beautiful piquancy of verjuice, simply throw a cube or two into whatever you're cooking.

